

# St. Petersburg Times

May 1, 2010

## Florida Gov. Crist's final 24 hours as a Republican

By Alex Leary, Times Staff Writer

*He tests a "people" message as he listens to pollsters, friends, family.*

TALLAHASSEE - Gov. Charlie Crist pushes back from his desk at the Capitol, slides off tortoiseshell reading glasses and flips open a cell phone. "Hey buddy," he says, "any knowledge?"

Crist is eager for news from his pollster. Taken two days before, the survey shows him winning a three-way race for U.S. Senate.

The moment - 11:12 a.m. Wednesday - solidifies Crist's decision to run as an independent, a stunning repudiation of his lifelong union with the Republican Party.

The governor paces amid his office of wood paneling, white and crimson drapes, miniature bust of Ronald Reagan and desk plaque reading You CAN do it! - alone except for a *St. Petersburg Times* reporter allowed to shadow him in the most critical time of his political career.

The poll, as Crist phrases it, "put some science behind" two weeks of encouragement from regular folks and big-name friends like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Donald Trump that he is making the right move.

Validating his decision, he spends the day not huddling with strategists or in deep reflection, but soliciting advice from those around him and unleashing a calculated, almost comical array of references to "the people."

It's a platitude that must now come through in a very real way.

Crist, 53, seems at once isolated and relaxed as he embarks on his final 24 hours as a Republican.

•••

**9 a.m. Wednesday:** Crist bounds down a stairwell leading from his office to the Cabinet room, where he will meet the elections canvassing committee. On the wall at the bottom of the steps is a mirror, there so Crist can straighten his necktie and check his hair, snow white and always perfect.

"This is what I call last chance," the perpetually tan governor says, a fitting sentiment.

He does his bit with the committee, then faces the news media. "Is this your last day as a Republican?" a reporter asks. "I didn't say that," the candidate replies.

**9:15 a.m.:** Back in the office, Crist pulls up a chair and says that as he left the Governor's Mansion that morning he looked over the oath he took in January 2007 to "well and faithfully" perform the duties of office.

It has guided his thinking, he says, that he serves neither Democrats nor Republicans but the people.

Crist recounts how the night before he was getting eyedrops at a CVS and a man approached him to say he should go independent. He talks about the teachers who flocked to his side after he vetoed a teacher tenure bill.

"You internalize it," Crist says. "I hear a real frustration with partisan politics, almost indignation, and I'm very sympathetic to that frustration."

He's test-driving a campaign theme, that much is obvious. But it's also clear that Crist is justifying the decision for himself, not ready to openly say he is switching. (Aides and family members confirm they did not learn the news until late Wednesday.)

Crist says he has no regrets - "none whatsoever" - about decisions as governor that led to the falling out with Republicans, including restoring felons' voting rights, appointing Democrats as agency heads and extending voting hours during the presidential election.

**9:45 a.m.:** Crist makes himself a cup of coffee with an extra shake of Coffee-mate. The drink and Ice Blue Mint Coolers will be his only sustenance for hours. Chief of staff Shane Strum pops in with an overview of an agency heads meeting, a discussion of the budget and an update on the gulf oil disaster.

**10 a.m.:** In a large conference room, Crist leads two rounds of applause and heaps on praise as he goes around the room. On the spot, he makes the interim head of his disaster agency the full-time director.

He interrupts a top aide, Kathy Mears, saying, "You don't work for me." She finishes the thought, "That's right, I work for the people."

**10:45 a.m.:** Crist kisses his fingers and touches them to a mezuzah, a small scroll affixed to his door frame that was a gift from state Rep. Adam Hasner, one of the many Republicans who now despise him. "It's supposed to bring good luck," Crist says. He reaches for his black Samsung cell phone to check messages. The in-box is full.

"Ever heard of Tom Golisano?" he asks, reading glasses perched on the end of his nose. "He just left a message."

Golisano is a billionaire businessman and owner of the Buffalo Sabres who has run as an independent candidate for governor in New York and recently moved to Naples.

"He said, 'I'm just calling with words of encouragement on your decision. Let me know what I can do to help.' "

Crist needs it. Even though he hasn't publicly made the switch to independent, some Republicans are saying they will ask for their money back, endangering Crist's estimated \$6 million stockpile.

Crist talks about Trump's support, then invokes another rich guy, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The previous night, he read a *New York Times* story on Bloomberg's decision to leave the GOP and become an independent, citing bitter partisanship. Crist says his outlook is similar.

**11 a.m.:** At a meeting with legislative interns from the University of Florida, a lanky student in a pink bowtie asks Crist what is his biggest accomplishment since taking office. "I'm very proud of the people I work with every day," Crist says. "Every day." The student appears to smirk.

Another intern asks how the tumultuous Senate race affects his day job. Crist compares himself to the major league pitcher Kevin Costner plays in *For Love of the Game*, a supposedly washed-up hack who mentally blocks out taunts and jeers from fans.

"I try to disregard the noise," Crist says, "listen to the people."

**11:20 a.m.:** Tennis great Chris Evert drops in before a physical fitness news event. Crist consoles her about her divorce from golfer Greg Norman. The discussion turns to politics. "Any advice?" Crist asks.

"Go independent," Evert replies. "When people ask me, 'What are you,' I can't say I'm Democrat or I'm Republican. I like a little bit of each."

"I talked to Arnold last night about it and he had the same advice," Crist says. "Schwarzenegger. Arnold. The Gubernator."

**1:15 p.m.:** Crist is interviewing Terence Perkins, a candidate for a circuit judgeship in the Daytona Beach area. The governor must choose between Perkins and two other candidates.

Perkins is talking about his career when, suddenly, Crist punches an open palm into the air, stopping him in midsentence.

"You're a judge," Crist says. "Congratulations. I just picked you."

Perkins reels back, stunned.

Crist met him minutes ago, but he wins the job because, responding to a question from Crist, he recalls the names of the plaintiffs in a major case he handled. Crist loves that kind of personal touch. "It's about the people," he explains when Perkins leaves the room.

**1:30 p.m.:** School district superintendents enter the office for a meeting. Many thank Crist for his veto two weeks earlier of the controversial teacher tenure bill. As the group leaves, one pulls Crist aside and says, "I am confident you will win."

Crist turns to a reporter. "Three for three," he exclaims, recounting how many people personally told him during the day that he should run as an independent.

He picks up a black suitcase and prepares to leave for the Governor's Mansion, where he'll pack his bag for St. Petersburg, his hometown; the decision will be announced the next day at a rally in a waterfront park not far from Crist's rented condominium. On the way out, Crist asks two assistants what he should do. They demur, visibly uncomfortable.

Crist just smiles and says goodbye. "Let's do this," he quips to a security agent.

**2:30 p.m.:** In the back seat of a black SUV, Crist reveals that his wife, Carole, was one of the motivating forces behind the independent run. "It was evolutionary," he says, alluding to months of growing hostility from some Republicans.

Though often not with him in Tallahassee, Carole Crist was heavily involved in campaign calculations. In one sign, Crist scrapped a series of long-planned meet-and-greet events with Republicans in southwest Florida on a recent weekend to be with his wife in Miami.

Talk turns back to that pivotal phone call he got earlier in the day, the one about the poll. The results showed him getting 36 percent of the vote, over Republican Marco Rubio (28) and Democrat Kendrick Meek (23).

"I want the people to be happy," Crist says. "I want to be able to please them."

The comfort he takes in the survey is ironic, as polling forced Crist to this dramatic point. As a Republican, he was losing by double digits to the conservative Rubio. Crist says those polls focus on a small segment of voters, a "club within a club."

**That evening:** Crist sits at the kitchen table at his parents' home in St. Petersburg. Just he and his father, Charles Crist Sr. For an hour they go back and forth, father telling son he should stay a Republican. Charlie says he feels all voters - the people - should decide the outcome.

"Go with your gut," Dad replies.

*Alex Leary can be reached at [leary@sptimes.com](mailto:leary@sptimes.com). Follow him on twitter @learyspt.*